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The Gorshkov Succession: Implications For the Soviet Navy

Summary

Admiral of the Fleet of the Soviet Union Sergei Gorshkov, 75, has served as commander of the Soviet Navy for 30 years, presiding over its growth from a coastal defense force to a blue water navy. Whoever succeeds him will inherit not only his accomplishments but also some difficult challenges, both from foreign navies and within the Soviet military structure. Foremost among the external challenges, will be the growing threat to Soviet territory from the increasing number of Western naval strategic strike platforms and the continuing vulnerability of Soviet ballistic missile submarines to attack by Western anti-submarine warfare (ASW) units. Internally, Gorshkov's successor may find it difficult to maintain the Navy's hard-won position in relation to the other services and the General Staff, especially in the competition for resources for expansion and modernization. [redacted]

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We believe that Fleet Admiral V. N. Chernavin, Chief of the Main Naval Staff and one of two first deputy commanders-in-chief of the Navy, is the most likely candidate to succeed Gorshkov. Recent major appointments in both civilian and military hierarchies suggest that General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev is advancing a new generation of leaders who will stress a high-technology, cost-effective approach to current problems, and the 56-year-old Chernavin seems to best fit this mold. Fleet Admiral N. I. Smirnov, who is 67 years old and the other first deputy commander-in-chief, also is a strong candidate. [redacted]

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Regardless of who succeeds Gorshkov, a change in leadership could have significant implications for the Navy:

- A new commander would not be able to count on inheriting Gorshkov's clout and maintaining intact the Navy's position in internal disagreements concerning roles and missions or the

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allocation of resources. Although a younger naval commander may in fact find it easier to work with the new political and military leadership that has recently emerged, his success in defending the Navy's interests will have to be established over time.

- Both Chernavin and Smirnov are submarine officers, whereas Gorshkov's early operational experience was with surface ships. Either of these officers might promote submarine programs at the expense of large surface ships such as aircraft carriers and nuclear-powered cruisers, which Gorshkov considers essential to the balanced development of the Soviet Navy. []

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1. Speculation about Gorshkov's replacement has been raised frequently during his long tenure, usually as the result of reports alleging health or political problems. Many of those previously touted as his successor have died, retired, or been demoted. Attache reporting from Moscow concerning Gorshkov's participation in various activities connected with Soviet Navy Day (28 July) this year does not indicate any serious problems with his personal or political health. The many recent changes in the Soviet military leadership, especially the retirement or death of men in their seventies, however, suggest that the Gorshkov era may soon end. []

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The Gorshkov Era

2. Major changes in the Soviet Navy's weapons and operations have occurred since Gorshkov took over in 1955:

- The establishment of a world-wide naval presence. When Gorshkov took command, Soviet naval units rarely operated beyond coastal waters. In contrast, on a typical day in 1985, some 170 naval units are deployed at some distance from the USSR, including permanent Soviet naval presence in or near the Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Ocean, West Africa, and Southeast Asia.
- Development of a strategic strike capability. Soviet naval capability to attack US territory, virtually non-existent in the mid-1950's, became the focal point of development during the Gorshkov era. The Soviet Navy now operates 62 modern nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), including four units of the Typhoon-class, the largest submarines ever built.
- Approximately one quarter of the Soviet Union's strategic nuclear

weapons are carried by SSBNs.

- Introduction of technologically-advanced general purpose naval units. The Soviet submarine force, for example, consisted of diesel-powered units when Gorshkov took command. Today it is composed mainly of nuclear-powered units, including some with unique design features such as titanium hull construction.
- Development of a balanced fleet including modern surface combatants and the USSR's first aircraft carriers. When Gorshkov took command, surface ships were viewed by many Soviet leaders as costly dinosaurs with little utility in modern warfare. New classes of ships introduced in the past 10 years, however, such as the V/STOL aircraft carrier Kiev, the nuclear-powered cruiser Kirov, and a large, possibly nuclear-powered, aircraft carrier currently under construction are transforming the Soviet Navy's surface ships into a potent force.

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3. Gorshkov's achievements have been remarkable because they took place in a country whose military history has been dominated by the role of the Army. The Russian Navy has suffered from long periods of neglect, punctuated by numerous military defeats and only occasional victories against second-class opponents. Gorshkov's writings indicate that carving out a major role for the new Soviet Navy required constant efforts to shape the attitudes of the political leadership. His success in promoting the Navy probably was aided by his personal relationship with former General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, which dated back to their service together in the Second World War. Gorshkov probably does not enjoy a similar relationship with Mikhail Gorbachev or any of the other members of the new generation of Soviet leaders.

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4. Although Gorshkov has been allocated substantial resources for his balanced naval procurement programs, recent writings indicate that differences continue to exist concerning the role of the Navy within the context of Soviet military strategy. For example, two April 1985 articles by Gorshkov in the Soviet military journals Morskoy Sbornik and Voyenno-Istoricheskiy Zhurnal contain discussions of command and control relationships in World War II and cite examples of outstanding results achieved when a naval authority was given command over joint ground, air, and sea operations along a coastal zone. We believe that these articles, although cast as historical analysis, continue a long-running effort by Gorshkov to increase naval authority over joint forces operations in ocean theaters of military operations. His writings suggest that he believes he has not won his case permanently and that he remains concerned that the General Staff--the institution primarily responsible for developing military strategy--does not pay enough attention to the unique requirements of naval operations.

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5. Gorshkov probably is concerned that some of his hard won gains for the Navy could be jeopardized once he is gone. One of the regular themes of his writings is that the Russian Navy often increased in size and capability under one leader only to decline rapidly under his successors. Much of the Navy's prestige gained under Gorshkov's leadership resulted from the acquisition of submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). According to Gorshkov, SLBMs gave the Navy, for the first time in history, the ability to play a decisive role in the outcome of a world war because they could strike strategic targets deep within the enemy's homeland. The continued vulnerability of Soviet ballistic missile submarines to Western ASW efforts and the development of Soviet mobile land-based missiles, however, may lead the General Staff to question whether sea-based nuclear forces should continue to receive their current share of resources in an era of more severe economic constraints. Another potential problem is the ability and even the willingness of Gorshkov's successor to continue costly surface ship programs such as Kirov nuclear-powered cruisers and the new class of large aircraft carriers.

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Likely Successors

6. There is little historical precedent to guide speculation concerning who will succeed Gorshkov.¹ His two principal deputies, Fleet Admirals V. N. Chernavin and N. I. Smirnov, are the most likely contenders.

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7. Chernavin. We believe that Fleet Admiral Vladimir Nikolayevich Chernavin, 56, is the most likely candidate to succeed Gorshkov. He became a first deputy commander-in-chief in 1981, when he was appointed chief of the Main Naval Staff, and he was promoted to his current rank in November 1983. His major responsibilities probably include running the Navy on a day-to-day basis through the Operations Directorate of the Main Naval Staff. Prior to his appointment, Chernavin served as commander of the Northern Fleet (1977-1981), the most important operational command in the Soviet Navy. Chernavin also is a frequent contributor to Morskoy Sbornik and other publications. His articles have encompassed a variety of subjects, including the need for improvements in naval readiness.

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¹ The Soviet Navy has had only three commanders since 1939: N. G. Kuznetsov 1939-1947; I. S. Yumashev 1947-1950; Kuznetsov again 1950-1955; and Gorshkov from 1955 (de facto; his position was not actually confirmed until 1956) to the present.

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Soviet naval officers have pointed to Chernavin as Gorshkov's eventual successor, mentioning his vigor, progressive attitude, and relative youth. []

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[] Chernavin was regarded within the Soviet Union as "the most outstanding sailor in the Soviet Navy." His strength was reported to be his expertise in "operational" matters, but his intellectual horizons were described as not extending beyond the Navy. US attache reporting depicts Chernavin as an intelligent and confident individual, and we estimate that he is making good use of his position on the Main Naval Staff to gain wider experience (for example, through membership in delegations visiting foreign countries). []

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9. There are indications that Chernavin's outlook on the role of the Soviet Navy may differ from Gorshkov's. One example was Chernavin's participation in a debate conducted in the pages of Morskoy Sbornik concerning the nature of "naval theory." We believe a major issue in the debate was whether enough attention was being paid to the Navy in the development of Soviet military strategy. Vice Admiral K. Stalbo, whom we believe to be a spokesman for Admiral Gorshkov, emphasized the importance of naval theory. Admiral Chernavin, along with other participants, took exception to some of Stalbo's arguments and placed greater emphasis on the subordination of naval theory within the overall subject of "military science." Chernavin's criticism of Stalbo suggests that he would be less assertive than Gorshkov in arguing the Navy's position within the military hierarchy. []

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10. Smirnov. Fleet Admiral Nikolay Ivanovich Smirnov, 67, has been a first deputy commander-in-chief of the Navy since 1974. His major responsibility probably is to serve as Gorshkov's deputy in the general direction of the Navy and in its relationship to the political leadership and the General Staff. []

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[] Smirnov as being well versed in broad political-military matters and effective in his dealings in the interservice and General Staff arena. []

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11. Smirnov, a frequent contributor to Morskoy Sbornik, has written on a variety of subjects, especially the need for greater competence on the part of commanding officers. He would be well suited to succeed Gorshkov because of his long experience at the top echelon and his previous experience as commander of the Pacific Fleet (1969-1974). []

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12. Other Possibilities. Other contenders for succession could include a former first deputy, a naval officer serving in the General Staff, and the commanders of the Northern and Pacific Fleets:

- Fleet Admiral G. M. Yegorov, 67, preceded Chernavin as chief of the Main Naval Staff. He was assigned in 1981 as head of DOSAAF,

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the organization responsible for quasi-military training of Soviet youth. Although this appointment took him away from the Navy, he has continued to maintain a fairly high profile by writing press and journal articles.

- Admiral N. N. Amelko, 70, has been the senior naval officer on the General Staff since 1978. Although his age and long separation from the Navy weigh against his selection, we speculate that his appointment might be supported by elements in the military hierarchy favoring a reduced role for the Navy.. [redacted]

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[redacted] described Amelko as being personally hostile to Gorshkov because he has not been promoted for over 20 years.

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- Admiral I. M. Kapitanets, 57, took command of the Northern Fleet early in 1985. He had commanded the Baltic Fleet since 1981.

- Admiral V. V. Sidorov, 61, has commanded the Pacific Fleet since 1981. He had commanded the Baltic Fleet since 1978.

More junior flag officers such as Vice Admiral M. N. Khronopulo, Black Sea Fleet commander, and Admiral K. V. Makarov, Baltic Fleet commander, are long shots.² [redacted]

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Implications of Succession

13. Gorshkov's tenure as commander-in-chief of the Soviet Navy has been one of relative stability and tremendous growth. (In contrast, the leaderships of both the General Staff and the Strategic Rocket Forces have changed six times since Gorshkov took command of the Navy.) Lacking Gorshkov's long years of experience, his successor may find it more difficult to argue effectively for allocating the resources needed to tackle some of the major problems still facing the Navy in the fulfillment of its wartime responsibilities:

- The vulnerability of Soviet SSBNs to Western ASW forces, especially attack submarines.

² Gorshkov was commander of the Black Sea Fleet before succeeding Kuznetsov, but this fleet was relatively more important in the mid-1950s than it is today. [redacted]

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- The lack of any significant capability to counter the US SSBN force.
- The increased Western threat to the Soviet Union resulting from the deployment of strategic cruise missiles on many US surface ships and submarines.

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14. All these problems have as their root cause major Soviet deficiencies in ASW capabilities. As a result, all the Soviet submarines and surface ships constructed over the years to strengthen the USSR's naval capability remain militarily vulnerable to US attacks, and the chief of the Soviet Navy remains bureaucratically vulnerable in internal disputes over resource allocation to charges that the Navy's large past expenditures have not bought effective, survivable forces commensurate in their military value with those built by other service chiefs. One key liability which Gorshkov's successor will carry into any argument for resources is the continued inability of the Soviet Navy to locate and destroy Western SSBNs. The Soviet ability to counter these units is now virtually nonexistent because of the lack of initial detection capability. Soviet efforts to solve this problem have been and still are extensive, ranging from improvements in traditional acoustic sensors to research into innovative approaches such as the exploitation of submerged wakes. Even taking these efforts into account, however, the Soviet Navy probably cannot make a convincing case to the Kremlin leadership that its ability to detect and track US SSBNs in the open ocean probably will improve over the next 10 years, primarily because of improvements in the US force--longer range missiles and quieter submarines.

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15. The future emphasis on the development of the Soviet SSBN force will be another key issue in determining the importance of the Navy in the Soviet military structure. The Navy has sought to decrease the vulnerability of its SSBNs by a variety of measures,

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Nevertheless, Soviet concern about the survivability of its SSBN force continues to be high, especially in light of announced plans by the US Navy to construct a new class of attack submarines specifically designed to operate in the Arctic ice environment that makes up much of the Soviet SSBN bastion areas.

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16. Gorshkov's successor may also find it more difficult to justify the existence of a large SSBN force because of the development and deployment of new weapons systems in other services. The Strategic Rocket Forces, for example, may argue to the General Staff that mobile ICBMs are an attractive alternative to SSBNs in attempting to establish a survivable strategic missile force. A challenge to the role of the SSBN force could also threaten many general purpose naval force programs because the wartime mission of many of

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these units is the protection of the SSBN force. Although Gorshkov's successor could argue that US threats such as the Trident SLBM and the Tomahawk cruise missile warrant an increase in expenditures for attack submarines and large surface combatants, a decreased need to protect SSBNs would rob the naval hierarchy of what has been a powerful argument for building a large Navy. [REDACTED]

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17. Another issue likely to face the new naval leadership is whether to continue Gorshkov's concept of a "balanced" navy. This concept acknowledges that submarines and aircraft are the main components of the Navy but accords surface ships an important role. Gorshkov was originally given command of the Navy in part to implement Khrushchev's desire to cut back on surface ship programs, and most of the Navy's construction resources have been devoted to submarines. His tenure, however, particularly the period since the mid-1970s, has been marked by the construction of a significant number of large surface combatants. [REDACTED]

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18. Articles in Morskoy Sbornik, particularly a series written by Vice Admiral Stalbo and Rear Admiral Pushkin in the late 1970s, indicated that the construction of large aircraft carriers had been opposed by some Soviet naval officers because of their expense and vulnerability to modern weapons. Arguments against large aircraft carriers have stressed their vulnerability to submarines and may reflect the belief that the resources involved in the construction and operation of aircraft carriers and other large surface ships would be better spent on additional submarines. In contrast to Gorshkov, who commanded destroyers and cruisers in his early years, both Chernavin and Smirnov are submarine officers. Although as fleet commanders and first deputies to Gorshkov they have had experience with all the arms of the naval service, as submariners they might be less inclined to support major surface ship construction programs than Gorshkov has been, especially if economic problems curtail resources for naval procurement. Smirnov, who has been associated with Gorshkov's programs for a long time, probably is less likely to depart from them radically than is Chernavin, who has been cryptically described by one senior Soviet naval officer as representing "the winds of change blowing through the Navy." [REDACTED]

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19. Gorshkov's writings in defense of the "balanced navy" concept stress that the Navy is unique among the services in its capability for peacetime operations far from Soviet territory. In these operations, generally described in terms of support for "state interests at sea in peacetime," surface ships play the primary role as highly visible symbols of Soviet military power. Any consideration of a reduction in surface ship programs,

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especially cancellation of the aircraft carrier program, therefore would involve a major reevaluation by the new political leadership of the value of the Navy as an instrument of foreign policy. The views of Gorshkov's successor on the relative merits of surface ships and submarines would be a significant, although not necessarily decisive, factor in such a reevaluation. [REDACTED]

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Soviet Naval Leadership



Admiral of the Fleet
of the Soviet Union
Sergei Gorshkov

Gorshkov in 1955,
his first year in
command of the Navy



Fleet Admiral
Vladimir Chernavin

Fleet Admiral
Nikolay Smirnov



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